

# Problem Gambling

## Public Health Model

The expansion of both legalized and illegal gambling opportunities challenges us to focus on the broad implications for both individual and community health. A public health model is well suited to address matters of healthy public policy, burden of illness, lifestyle behaviors and promotion of healthy decisions. Through seeking to understand the distribution and determinants of gambling problems in the general population and among subgroups, as well as the potential benefits, there is opportunity to develop effective strategies to protect vulnerable people, foster responsible choices with regard to gambling (for those who choose to participate in legal gambling activities) and improve the quality of community life.

A multi-dimensional public health framework could stimulate a better understanding of gambling, help to illuminate the determinants of problem and pathological gambling, its potential consequences and the various opportunities for multi-level interventions.<sup>1</sup> Like most public health issues, gambling involves a complex relationship among multiple determinants. When applied to gambling, the public health paradigm invites consideration of a broad array of prevention, harm minimization and treatment strategies targeting various elements of the model.

Generally speaking, four steps are recommended:

1. Adopt strategic goals for gambling that provide a focus for public health action and accountability.
2. Endorse public health principles. The following are three primary principles:
  - a. Ensure prevention is a community priority.
  - b. Incorporate a multi-faceted mental health promotion approach.
  - c. Foster personal and social responsibility for gambling policies and practices.
3. Adopt harm reduction strategies.
4. Allocate appropriate resources to identify and treat problem gamblers prior to their possible progression to pathological gambling.

The most cost effective way to assist potential problem gamblers and minimize the associated harms is to educate them about the risk factors so that those who are at risk either will choose to abstain from gambling or will make a concerted effort to follow the principles of gambling responsibly if they do choose to gamble, and they (or their family members) will at least recognize the symptoms of problem gambling early so that the individuals can work to avoid becoming engulfed by the condition.

Problem gambling is not an issue that can be attacked on any one front. It requires the attention, cooperation and resources of many public and private organizations. Only through a cooperative effort with other public agencies and providers of education and treatment services can this goal be efficiently and effectively achieved.

<sup>1</sup> Shaffer, H.J., & Korn, D.A. (2002). *Gambling and Related Mental Disorders: A Public Health Analysis*. Annual Review Public Health, vol. 23, p. 171-212

**Missouri's Collaborative Approach** – Missouri took its first steps toward a proactive public health model for problem gambling with the formation of the Missouri Alliance to Curb Problem Gambling (Alliance) in 1997. The Alliance, of which the Missouri Gaming Commission is an active governing member, brings together diverse groups who share a common interest of working on issues relating to problem gambling and consists of both governing and participating members.<sup>2</sup> Working together allows the members to streamline the provision of problem gambling programs and services, prevent duplication of efforts, and to be fiscally efficient with state, public and private resources - maximizing the benefit of each dollar available for problem gambling services.

The Alliance is a pivotal component in Missouri's innovative and comprehensive program to address the public health implications of gambling and problem gambling following the steps recommended by Shafer and Korn. Missouri is recognized both nationally and internationally as a proactive leader in gambling problem services. Indeed, many other states and countries have emulated various components of Missouri's multi-dimensional approach to problem gambling prevention, outreach, harm minimization and treatment, and have often expressed surprise at how much Missouri has accomplished with its limited budget.

**Voluntary Exclusion Program** – The Commission developed a unique voluntary exclusion program designed to provide problem gamblers with a means to acknowledge that they have a problem and to take personal responsibility for it. Although the Commission believes the voluntary exclusion program is helping many people who are suffering through a gambling problem, the Commission continues to review it and explore new ideas to get people the help they need.

This program was developed in 1996 in response to a request from a citizen who recognized the need for an external tool to self-exclude from all casinos in the state as a part of his recovery program. At that time, the consensus in the field among treatment professionals and researchers was that there is no cure for pathological gambling and, therefore, the program should be for life with no provision for removal.

The Commission has again received requests from residents seeking a problem gambling tool that better fits their needs. In response to these requests, as well as recent scientific research, Commission staff have been investigating revising the program to offer a "menu" of self-exclusion options. While the research and treatment community still advocate that pathological gamblers are unable to resume gambling activity in a responsible manner, recent research also indicates many individuals who experience problems from their gambling activity do not necessarily progress to the more extreme level of pathological gambling and may only experience episodic gambling problems during a traumatic life event, such as a divorce or loss of a loved one. These individuals could potentially benefit greatly from a tool that allows them to self-exclude for a period of time while they work their way through their personal trauma.

Furthermore, there are also a number of pathological gamblers who have expressed that they are not yet ready to commit to a lifetime self-exclusion, but are interested in some other period of self-exclusion. Anecdotal evidence has shown that many of these individuals exclude with individual Class A licensees and later choose to place themselves on the List. Therefore, they too could benefit from the availability of increased options for the self-exclusion period.

<sup>2</sup> Governing members who share the responsibility of administering the Alliance programs include: the Missouri Department of Mental Health; the Missouri Gaming Commission; the Missouri Lottery; the Port Authority of Kansas City; the Missouri Riverboat Gaming Association, a private trade organization that represents riverboat casino operators; and the Missouri Council on Problem Gambling Concerns, Inc., a non-profit advocacy group for problem gamblers.



Participating members are non-voting members who desire to participate in Alliance activities and share their unique expertise and viewpoints to assist in comprehensively addressing problem gambling issues in the state. Participating members could include local government entities that host licensed gambling activities, private social service organizations, mental health advocates, researchers, counselors and counseling agencies, education institutions, consumer credit counseling agencies, charitable gaming operators and chambers of commerce.

For more information about the Alliance or becoming a participating member, please contact Melissa Stephens at 573-526-4080.

The enhancements to the program also include a behavioral health education component targeting areas of vulnerability for problem gamblers and their family members, including building a healthier relationship with money through improving their fiscal literacy, identifying healthier coping strategies and teaching the individual to recognize and counteract their cognitive distortions about their gambling (and other high-risk) behaviors. This education component will provide problem gamblers and their loved ones an opportunity to learn how to make healthier choices about their behavioral lifestyles and choices.

There are currently more than 8,900 individuals on the List and approximately 145 applications are received each month. There was a 15 percent increase in applications for placement on the List of Disassociated Persons (also known as the Voluntary Exclusion Program) for FY 2005 over FY 2004. Indeed, more than 440 individuals initiated an application during the fourth quarter of FY 2005, a 21 percent increase over the same time period for the previous year. These appear to be statistically significant since the projected increase was anticipated to be approximately seven percent. The Commission believes the increase in program access to result from expanded outreach efforts as well as intermittent and ongoing media coverage of the Commission's current deliberations on the potential revision of the program.

**Missouri Problem Gambling Research** – The Department of Health and Senior Services added three questions on gambling to the 2004 BRFSS survey at the request of the Alliance. This annual survey is accomplished with support from the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (CDC).<sup>3</sup> The BRFSS is the world's largest telephone survey; it tracks health risks in the United States. Information from the survey is used to improve the health of the American people. Since there has not yet been a statewide problem gambling prevalence study accomplished for Missouri, this was an important step to conduct at least a brief inspection of gambling and problem gambling activity by Missouri residents. The gambling questions used for the 2004 Missouri BRFSS were identified from other states that have included them on their own state's BRFSS for several years.

The preliminary results from the 2004 BRFSS were received in June 2005 and indicated 31.7 percent of the surveyed Missouri adults acknowledged gambling in the prior 12 months. However, the Missouri Lottery's market research results indicate more than 70 percent of Missouri adults reported purchasing a Lottery ticket in the past year.

Thus, rather than indicating that less than 1/3 of Missouri adults have gambled in the past year, this result supports the anecdotal evidence from the Alliance's outreach efforts that many Missourians do not identify many locally-available and/or socially-accepted gambling activities as "gambling" and supports the need for continued education and outreach efforts. If a citizen does not recognize their activity as a gambling activity, they would be unlikely to identify any associated warning signs as an indication of a problem with gambling, and, therefore, would be less likely to access the appropriate resources for help.

<sup>3</sup> Visit <http://www.cdc.gov/brfss/index.htm> for additional information about the BRFSS.

**Responsible Gaming Education Month (RGEM)** – Governor Bob Holden officially proclaimed August 2004 Missouri Responsible Gaming Education Month and events for the awareness month included an educational exhibit at the 2004 Missouri Black Expo; an exhibit, two focus groups and an educational track on underage addiction prevention and problem gambling issues at the Statewide Prevention Conference; and hosting the Midwest Conference on Problem Gambling and Substance Abuse. Class A licensees also audited their own properties and the properties of their fellow members of the Missouri Riverboat Gaming Association to ensure full compliance with the American Gaming Association's Code of Conduct for Responsible Gaming.<sup>4</sup>

Missouri is the only state, to our knowledge, to set aside one month to highlight awareness activities promoting problem gambling outreach and education. In 1999, Missouri was also the first state in the country to set aside a week to promote responsible gaming and to educate its residents about the programs available to help problem gamblers. The response to the awareness week was so positive that awareness events gradually were held throughout the month. Thus, in 2003 the Alliance requested to expand from an awareness week to an awareness month. RGEW and RGEM have been extremely valuable tools to promote awareness of problem gambling as a public health issue. Although the Alliance provides outreach, presentations and exhibits throughout the year, the events that are provided within the context of a declared awareness month yield a much greater opportunity for media coverage and, therefore, reach many more citizens. The Alliance has been able to note spikes in the utilization of various problem gambling programs and services following each of the past RGEWs and RGEMs.

The Missouri Gaming Commission and other members of the Alliance have been diligently working on the events that will be the highlights of Missouri Responsible Gaming Education Month. These events will include an exhibit, one focus group and an educational track on underage addiction prevention and problem gambling issues at the NCADA National Youth Leadership Conference in St. Louis; an educational exhibit at the 2005 Missouri Black Expo; and hosting the 2005 Midwest Conference on Problem Gambling and Substance Abuse. The Missouri Riverboat Gaming Association is also providing special training on problem gambling issues for employees at each Class A licensee and launching a new awareness campaign for patrons.

**Midwest Conference on Problem Gambling and Substance Abuse** – The 2004 Midwest Conference on Problem Gambling and Substance Abuse was a collaborative effort with representatives from a variety of state agencies and organizations in Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska to facilitate this regional conference and to jointly apply for a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The conference was well-received and resulted in not only expanding the awareness of problem gambling as a potential co-occurring disorder among mental health and substance abuse clients, but also in the assignment of problem gambling as a core issue for the Prairielands Addiction Transfer Technology Center (PATTC). Not long after PATTC was directed to be the lead ATTC on problem gambling issues, SAMHSA issued a mandate to all ATTCs to be prepared to provide information on problem gambling issues for their service areas.

<sup>4</sup> The AGA Code of Conduct for Responsible Gaming was enacted September 2003 by the AGA Board of Directors. For more information, visit [http://www.americangaming.org/programs/responsiblegaming/code\\_public.cfm](http://www.americangaming.org/programs/responsiblegaming/code_public.cfm)

Missouri is proud to have hosted the second Midwest Conference on Problem Gambling and Substance Abuse at the Hyatt Regency-Crown Center in Kansas City on August 24-26, 2005. Due to the success of the 2004 conference, SAMHSA chose to provide some discretionary funding to assist in funding the 2005 conference. The conference was opened with a plenary session on overcoming obstacles to outreach, treatment and recovery; this plenary session was open to the public at no cost. Registrations included attendees from throughout the U.S., as well as Canada and Sweden.<sup>5</sup>

**National Conference on Problem Gambling** – In June 2005, the National Council on Problem Gambling announced its selection of Missouri as the host state for the 2007 National Conference on Problem Gambling. The selection of Missouri to host the national conference was influenced by the key roles held by various members of the Missouri Alliance to Curb Problem Gambling in hosting the first Midwest Conference on Problem Gambling and Substance Abuse (Midwest Conference) as a featured event of Missouri's Responsible Gaming Education Month in August 2004, as well as the international reputation of both Missouri and the Alliance as proactive and innovative leaders in problem gambling programs for prevention, education/outreach and treatment.

**Underage Prevention Efforts** – The Alliance members jointly sponsor two in-school programs on preventing problem gambling and other addictive behaviors. Due to the common risk factors and warning signs between many of the addictive and compulsive behaviors, the need for schools to streamline their efforts on addiction education, as well as the reluctance to address problem gambling as a potential issue, the Alliance has created two innovative programs for middle-school and junior high students that use an “umbrella approach” to addressing addiction and high-risk behaviors. Both programs include extra information on problem gambling issues to help address the disparity in information and resources available. “Addiction – the Game No One Wins” is an assembly program featuring a dramatic duo who provide education on problem gambling issues.

**Speakers Bureau and Traveling Educational Exhibits** – The Missouri Gaming Commission participated in more than 24 speaking engagements and exhibits during FY 2005. Through these efforts Commission staff provided gambling outreach services to more than 700 individuals.

Speakers are available to provide presentations to groups and organizations throughout the state on a variety of topics relating to problem gambling and the guidelines for gambling responsibly.<sup>6</sup> All presentations are free of charge and include information about the resources available in Missouri for residents who have a gambling problem, or loved one with a gambling problem.

<sup>5</sup> Please visit the conference Web site at [http://www.888betsoff.com/links/midwest\\_conference.shtml](http://www.888betsoff.com/links/midwest_conference.shtml) for a full list of presenters, agenda items, sponsors and details on conference happenings.

<sup>6</sup> To request a presentation or exhibit for an event in your area, please contact Melissa Stephens at 573-526-4080